

Short, Sweet and Shallow



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

The sense of frustration that overcomes me when I cannot remember something that seems vital in the moment has become a recurring, increasingly unpleasant phenomenon. Like many of my generation I instinctively blame the *inability to recall* information on my aging brain. I blame my *inaccurate recall* (e.g., “cappy hampers” instead of “happy campers”) on the fact that I have “too many balls in the air.” My daughter delights in comparing me to her paternal grandmother, who is legendary in our family for comical “cappy hampers” utterances.

This week I’ve been reading a terrific new book, [The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains](#), by Nicholas Carr. In his thought-provoking work Carr posits that immersion in our e-world changes the chemistry of the human brain as well as personal learning habits and preferences. According to Carr, we have become shallow learners addicted to the “short, sweet and bitty.”

As we habitually skip and skim through reading material we miss the richness found within. It’s a *Cliff Notes* and *Headline News* world. The author reminds us that so much of learning is found in contextual understanding, which is far more difficult—if not impossible—to appreciate while skimming. The same is true in the world of risk management. It’s impossible to understand a nonprofit’s exposure to harm by reading a short description of the organization’s programs, participants or screening protocol. And understanding how these activities come to life and the environment in which they occur is essential to accurately measuring the nature of risk and adequacy of risk response measures.

Later in [The Shallows](#), Carr explores the difference between computer memory and biological memory, noting that biological memory is “organic...It exists in time, changing as the body changes.” The author tells us we are mistaken when we believe that memories can be offloaded to networked hard drives. Human memories are “contingent,” changing over time, with the quality of memories inextricably linked to how the information is processed. Information processed by a human brain continues to “cook”—just as a steak continues to “cook” after you remove it from the grill.

The same is not true with information stored by an artificial, computer “brain.” Notes Carr: “Biological memory is alive. Computer memory is not.” According to memory expert Nelson Cowan of the University of Missouri, and contrary to one of my favorite excuses for forgetfulness, “the normal human brain never reaches a point at which experiences can no longer be committed to memory; the brain cannot be full.”

As I read [The Shallows](#) I couldn't help begin to link its lessons to a common but inadvisable risk management strategy: offloading risk management to a system, "program" or information system. While many of us would love to find a slick system that does the heavy lifting of managing complex risks, there is no substitute for harnessing human brains for this critical task. The nature of the brain—the lack of an "off" switch and the biology of continuous processing—makes it the ideal tool with which to understand and cope with risk in your nonprofit. As your agency's risks evolve and morph over time, your brain is uniquely equipped to process new information with old and guide you to actions that are best suited to the changing environment in which your nonprofit exists.

The concept that storing information in our brains is of little use—since the Web makes it so easy to retrieve the information we need—leads us astray from the process of building our "personal store" of memories and in doing so, sharpening our minds. As quoted in [The Shallows](#), clinical psychologist Sheila Crowell says that the "very act of remembering... appears to modify the brain in a way that can make it easier to learn ideas and skills in the future."

It's time to ban the excuses about our "aging" brains and our misplaced pride in multitasking. The nonprofits we love and serve deserve so much more.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your feedback on this article and questions about the NRMC's resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.